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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews the current status of pronunciation instruction in adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes. The current focus on communicative approaches to ESL instruction and the concern for building teamwork and communication skills in an increasingly diverse workplace are renewing interest in the role that pronunciation plays in adults' overall communicative competence. As a result, pronunciation is emerging from its often marginalized place in adult ESL instruction. Separate sections of the Digest highlight the history of pronunciation instruction, factors influencing pronunciation mastery, language features involved in pronunciation, incorporating pronunciation in the curriculum, and incorporating pronunciation in instruction. (Contains 8 references.) (Author/JL)

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Improving Adult ESL Learners' Pronunciation Skills

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Observations that limited pronunciation skills can undermine learners' self-confidence, restrict social interactions, and negatively influence estimations of a speaker's credibility and abilities are not new (Morley, 1998). However, the current focus on communicative approaches to English as a second language (ESL) instruction and the concern for building teamwork and communication skills in an increasingly diverse workplace are renewing interest in the role that pronunciation plays in adults' overall communicative competence. As a result, pronunciation is emerging from its often marginalized place in adult ESL instruction.

This digest reviews the current status of pronunciation instruction in adult ESL classes. It provides an overview of the factors that influence pronunciation mastery and suggests ways to plan and implement pronunciation instruction.

Historical Perspective

Pronunciation instruction tends to be linked to the instructional method being used (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). In the grammar-translation method of the past, pronunciation was almost irrelevant and therefore seldom taught. In the audio-lingual method, learners spent hours in the language lab listening to and repeating sounds and sound combinations. With the emergence of more holistic, communicative methods and approaches to ESL instruction, pronunciation is addressed within the context of real communication (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Morley, 1991).

Factors Influencing Pronunciation Mastery

Research has contributed some important data on factors that can influence the learning and teaching of pronunciation skills. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, (1996), Gillette (1994), Graham (1994) and Pennington (1994) discuss the following factors.

Age. The debate over the impact of age on language acquisition and specifically pronunciation is varied. Some researchers argue that, after puberty, lateralization (the assigning of linguistic functions to the different brain hemispheres) is completed, and adults' ability to distinguish and produce native-like sounds is more limited. Others refer to the existence of sensitive periods when various aspects of language acquisition occur, or to adults' need to re-adjust existing neural networks to accommodate new sounds. Most researchers, however, agree that adults find pronunciation more difficult than children do and that they probably will not achieve native-like pronunciation. Yet experiences with language learning and the ability to self-monitor, which come with age, can offset these limitations to some degree.

Amount and type of prior pronunciation instruction. Prior experiences with such pronunciation instruction may influence learners' success with current efforts. Learners at higher language proficiency levels may have developed habitual, systematic pronunciation errors that must be identified and addressed.

Aptitude. Individual capacity for learning languages has been debated. Some researchers believe all learners have the same capacity to learn a second language because they have learned a first language. Others assert that the ability to recognize and internalize foreign sounds may be unequally developed in different learners.

Learner attitude and motivation. Nonlinguistic factors related to an individual's personality and learning goals can influence achievement in pronunciation. Attitude toward the target language, culture, and native speakers; degree of acculturation (including exposure to and use of the target language); personal identity issues; and motivation for learning can all support or impede pronunciation skills development.

Native language. Most researchers agree that the learner's first language influences the pronunciation of the target language and is a significant factor in accounting for foreign accents. So-called interference or negative transfer from the first language is likely to cause errors in aspiration, intonation, and rhythm in the target language.

The pronunciation of any one learner might be affected by a combination of these factors. The key is to be aware of their existence so that they may be considered in creating realistic and effective pronunciation goals and development plans for the learners. For example, native-like pronunciation is not likely to be a realistic goal for older learners; a learner who is a native speaker of a tonal language, such as Vietnamese, will need assistance with different pronunciation features than will a native Spanish speaker; and a twenty-three year old engineer who knows he will be more respected and possibly promoted if his pronunciation improves is likely to be responsive to direct pronunciation instruction.

Language Features Involved in Pronunciation

Two groups of features are involved in pronunciation: segmentals and suprasegmentals. *Segmentals* are the basic inventory of distinctive sounds and the way that they combine to form a spoken language. In the case of North American English, this inventory is composed of 40 *phonemes* (15 vowels and 25 consonants), which are the basic sounds that serve to distinguish words from one another. Pronunciation instruction has often concentrated on the mastery of segmentals through discrimination and production of target sounds via drills consisting of minimal pairs like /hæd/-/hʊd/ or /sɪt/-/set/.

Suprasegmentals transcend the level of individual sound production. They extend across segmentals and are often produced unconsciously by native speakers. Since suprasegmental elements provide crucial context and support (they determine meaning) for segmental production, they are assuming a more prominent place in pronunciation instruction (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Gilbert, 1990; Morley, 1991). Suprasegmentals include the following:

- stress--a combination of length, loudness, and pitch applied to syllables in a word (e.g., Happy, FOOTball).

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- rhythm–the regular, patterned beat of stressed and unstressed syllables and pauses (e.g., with weak syllables in lower case and stressed syllables in upper case: they WANT to GO Later.);
- adjustments in connected speech–modifications of sounds within and between words in streams of speech (e.g., "ask. him." /æsk. hɪm/ becomes /æs kɪm/);
- prominence–speaker's act of highlighting words to emphasize meaning or intent (e.g., Give me the BLUE one. (not the yellow one); and
- intonation–the rising and falling of voice pitch across phrases and sentences (e.g., Are you READy?).

Incorporating Pronunciation in the Curriculum

In general, programs should start by establishing long range oral communication goals and objectives that identify pronunciation needs as well as speech functions and the contexts in which they might occur (Morley, 1998). These goals and objectives should be realistic, aiming for functional intelligibility (ability to make oneself relatively easily understood), functional communicability (ability to meet the communication needs one faces), and enhanced self-confidence in use (Gilliette, 1995; Jordan, 1992; Morley, 1998). They should result from a careful analysis and description of the learners' needs (Jordan, 1992; Morley, 1998). This analysis should then be used to support selection and sequencing of the pronunciation information and skills for each sub-group or proficiency level within the larger learner group (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996).

To determine the level of emphasis to be placed on pronunciation within the curriculum, programs need to consider certain variables specific to their contexts.

- the learners (ages, educational backgrounds, experiences with pronunciation instruction, motivations, general English proficiency levels)
- the instructional setting (academic, workplace, English for specific purposes, literacy, conversation, family literacy)
- institutional variables (teachers' instructional and educational experiences, focus of curriculum, availability of pronunciation materials, class size, availability of equipment)
- linguistic variables (learners' native languages, diversity or lack of diversity of native languages within the group)
- methodological variables (method or approach embraced by the program)

Incorporating Pronunciation in Instruction

Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996) propose a framework that supports a communicative-cognitive approach to teaching pronunciation. Preceded by a planning stage to identify learners' needs, pedagogical priorities, and teachers' readiness to teach pronunciation, the framework for the teaching stage of the framework offers a structure for creating effective pronunciation lessons and activities on the sound system and other features of North American English pronunciation.

- description and analysis of the pronunciation feature to be targeted (raises learner awareness of the specific feature)
- listening discrimination activities (learners listen for and practice recognizing the targeted feature)
- controlled practice and feedback (support learner production of the feature in a controlled context)
- guided practice and feedback (offer structured communication exercises in which learners can produce and monitor for the targeted feature)
- communicative practice and feedback (provides opportunities for the learner to focus on content but also get feedback on where specific pronunciation instruction is needed).

A lesson on word stress, based on this framework, might look like the following:

1. The teacher presents a list of vocabulary items from the current lesson, employing both correct and incorrect word stress. After discussing the words and eliciting (if appropriate) learners' opinions on which are the correct versions, the concept of word stress is introduced and modeled.
2. Learners listen for and identify stressed syllables, using sequences of nonsense syllables of varying lengths (e.g., da-DA, da-da-DA, da-da-DA-da).
3. Learners go back to the list of vocabulary items from step one and, in unison, indicate the correct stress patterns of each word by clapping, emphasizing the stressed syllables with louder claps. New words can be added to the list for continued practice if necessary.
4. In pairs, learners take turns reading a scripted dialogue. As one learner speaks, the other marks the stress patterns on a printed copy. Learners provide one another with feedback on their production and discrimination.
5. Learners make oral presentations to the class on topics related to their current lesson. Included in the assessment criteria for the activity are correct production and evidence of self-monitoring of word stress.

In addition to careful planning, teachers must be responsive to learners' needs and explore a variety of methods to help learners comprehend pronunciation features. Useful exercises include the following:

- Have learners touch their throats to feel vibration or no vibration in sound production, to understand voicing.
- Have learners use mirrors to see placement of tongue and lips or shape of the mouth.
- Have learners use kazoos to provide reinforcement of intonation patterns.
- Have learners stretch rubber bands to illustrate lengths of vowels.
- Provide visual or auditory associations for a sound (a buzzing bee demonstrates the pronunciation of /z/).
- Ask learners to hold up fingers to indicate numbers of syllables in words.

Conclusion

Pronunciation can be one of the most difficult parts of a language for adult learners to master and one of the least favorite topics for teachers to address in the classroom. Nevertheless, with careful preparation and integration, pronunciation can play an important role in supporting learners' overall communicative power.

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